



# WHY MARRY IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH?



“WITH trust in God’s faithfulness, everything can be faced responsibly and without fear. Christian spouses are not naïve; they know life’s problems and temptations. But they are not afraid to be responsible before God and before society. They do not run away, they do not hide, they do not shirk the mission of forming a family and bringing children into the world. But today, Father, it is difficult... Of course it is difficult! That is why we need the grace, **the grace that comes**

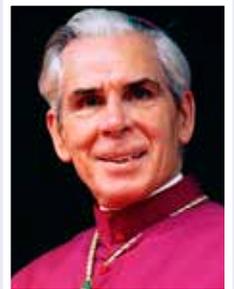
**from the sacrament!** The sacraments are not decorations in life – what a beautiful marriage, what a beautiful ceremony, what a beautiful banquet... But that is not the sacrament of marriage. That is a decoration! Grace is not given to decorate life but rather to make us strong in life, giving us courage to go forwards! And without isolating oneself but always staying together.”<sup>1</sup>

**T**oday many question why couples should marry in the Church. Popular culture, the wedding industry and celebrity weddings have all had a profound impact on expectations and even on traditions associated with the marriage ceremony itself. At a time when the number of religiously celebrated marriages in Australia has been falling, the proportion of religious weddings celebrated in the Catholic Church has remained relatively steady.<sup>2</sup> For many Catholics today, getting married in the Church is still important for them even if some lack a deep awareness of why they feel that way.

This should not be a great surprise to us. For Catholics, the Church is the physical place and spiritual home to which we come to receive the sacraments, and to be blessed, forgiven, sanctified and prayed for at key moments during our life – e.g. our Baptism, Reconciliation, First Holy Communion, our Marriage.

Having God present in a tangible way at our marriage ceremony and afterwards seems natural.

The famous Archbishop Fulton Sheen (pictured) in his popular book *Three to Get Married*, spoke of the importance of keeping God at the centre of our lives if we really want to flourish as individuals, spouses and parents.<sup>3</sup>



■ The Wedding of Mary and Joseph by Giovanni Manuseti from 14 century in church of San Martino on Burano island.

### What is so important about getting married in a Church building?

The obligation upon Catholics to marry in the Church is based on the principle that you cannot really separate Christian marriage from its sacramental reality.<sup>4</sup> A valid marriage between two baptised Christians is always a sacrament; it facilitates Christ's encounter with the spouses in a profound way. Because at its heart Christian Marriage is about relationship it should be celebrated in a place which expresses the truth of that special relationship which the spouses have with Christ and with one another. Christian Marriage is much more than a contract; it is a covenant between persons vowed before God and His Church community.

*“According to the Latin [Western] tradition, the spouses as ministers of Christ's grace mutually confer upon each other the sacrament of Matrimony by expressing their consent before the Church”*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1622).

### If the sacrament is bestowed by the couple themselves, why is it necessary for them to do so in the Church and presence of the community?

The Church has always encouraged Catholics to marry in the Church for important spiritual and pastoral reasons.

Firstly, the couple expresses their faith in Christ and their love for each other by coming to the altar to marry in the presence of the Catholic community. Here they give themselves to each other before the altar where Christ gives Himself to us every Eucharist. It is entirely appropriate for a couple to invite Christ, present in the tabernacle in the Church, to their wedding. They are doing what the married couple at Cana did two thousand years ago when following that invitation, Christ performed His first public miracle (*John 2*).

It is of particularly deep significance when two Catholics marry one another within a Nuptial Mass. The bodies of each of the spouses come together in a special way through the Sacrament of Matrimony;

they become ‘one flesh’. Following their vows before God and the community, the first act which they then undertake as spouses is to receive Christ. Within Mass, the Church community also promises its prayer and support for the couple in their life-long journey together.

*“It is therefore fitting that the spouses should seal their consent to give themselves to each other through the offering of their own lives by uniting it to the offering of Christ for his Church made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice, and by receiving the Eucharist so that, communicating in the same Body and the same Blood of Christ, they may form but “one body” in Christ.”* (CCC 1621)

A ‘mixed marriage’ is the term which is often used to describe marriages where one person is a Catholic and their intended spouse is either of another faith tradition or of no faith. Human experience shows us that such marriages have additional challenges. However, the Church respects the desire of these couples who wish to marry in the Catholic Church, and strives at the wedding to accommodate the non-Catholic spouse and their family and friends. It is important for spouses to understand the specific challenges which come with a ‘mixed marriage’ and how these particularly relate to the upbringing of children. A special permission or dispensation is required from the local bishop prior to the conduct of a mixed marriage.

### Marriage and religious practice

- Couples who marry in the Church and attend church regularly together report significantly happier marriages and experience a much lower rate of divorce than couples who marry civilly and/or do not attend church regularly<sup>5</sup>;
- Practising Catholics, especially those who enter matrimony with another practising Catholic, have one of the highest marriage success rates<sup>6</sup>;
- Married couples who pray together on a regular basis exhibit the highest levels of communication, intimacy and forgiveness compared with couples who do not pray together<sup>7</sup>.

### Lifelong support for marriage

The Church devotes considerable effort towards the preparation of couples for marriage. This is because she wishes to share her wisdom of millennia about the great value and meaning of human love. It comes from a genuine desire to ensure each couple is properly prepared for marriage and understands its sacramental nature and the obligations they are freely choosing. Couples need to properly comprehend the significance and meaning of the vows they are making in marriage because it is a very important life decision for them and for their children.



# REFLECTIONS on the Wedding Vows

(from *Marriage Preparation and the Rite of Marriage*, LMF Centre)



## “I take you to be my wife/husband”

The public pronouncement of the marriage vow reminds us of why married life is personal, but never private. The public witnessing of the vows reminds all present of that authentic and living sign of God’s love which each married couple is called to be in the Church and the world.

## “To have and to hold”

The marital bond is an exclusive and faithful one, which is particularly manifest within the shared sexual love of husband and wife.

## “From this day forward”

These words echo the Church’s tradition that the exclusive and faithful love found within marriage is the only appropriate setting for the expression of sexual intimacy. Something very special occurs in marriage which profoundly changes the nature of the couple relationship.

## “For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health”

This is a promise which says that whatever the future may hold, this man and this woman will face it together in total and equal partnership. The spouses know that marriage involves a reciprocal call to unconditional love.

*“All marriages go through difficult times, especially when couples must face changes in themselves and in their circumstances. A marriage is thus as much a journey of faith and trust, as it is of love.”<sup>8</sup>*

## “Until death do us part”

Just as Christ will never abandon us, so spouses must love each other for life. The goodness and enduring nature of marriage must be respected by those who enter into it and by the whole society. Couples should be confident in knowing that many have gone before them and have achieved great happiness.

“ Christians celebrate the sacrament of marriage because they know they need it! They need it to stay together and to carry out their mission as parents. *“In joy and in sadness, in sickness and in health”*. This is what the spouses say to one another during the celebration of the sacrament and in their marriage they pray with one another and with the community. ...They do so because they need to, for the long journey they are making together: it is a long journey, not for a brief spell but for an entire life! And they need Jesus’ help to walk beside one another in trust, to accept one another each day, and daily to forgive one another.<sup>9</sup> POPE FRANCIS ”

# Practicalities of Marriage in the Catholic Church

## What does the Church normally require of a couple to enable them to marry in the Church?

The Church requires that both the man and the woman give themselves freely to each other without reservation, that they commit to respect and love one another for the rest of their lives and that they will accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the teachings of Christ and His Church. Catholics are also required to observe what is called the 'canonical form' of marriage, which simply means that he or she must marry before a priest (or deacon) and two witnesses. Sometimes Catholics are confronted with a situation (such as serious religious differences) which makes a marriage in the Church before a priest and two witnesses difficult or even impossible, and in such a case the bishop can give his permission for the marriage to be celebrated elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>



## What are Dispensations? When are they needed?

**Permission for Mixed Marriage** – when a Catholic wishes to marry a baptised non-Catholic.

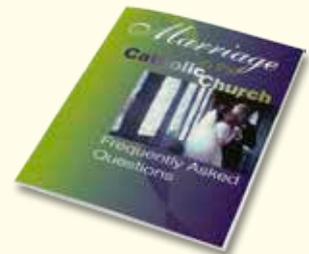
**Disparity of Worship** – when a Catholic wishes to marry an unbaptised person. NB. With respect to both the above dispensations, the Catholic party needs to declare that he or she will avoid defecting from the faith and will do all in their power to bring any children of the marriage up as Catholics. The non-Catholic party needs to be made aware of this commitment by their future spouse and both parties need to undertake instruction and accept the purposes and essential properties of marriage.

**Place of ceremony** – when a Catholic wishes to marry a non-Catholic and for important pastoral reasons it is requested that the ceremony take place in a non-Catholic church.



## Marriage Checklist

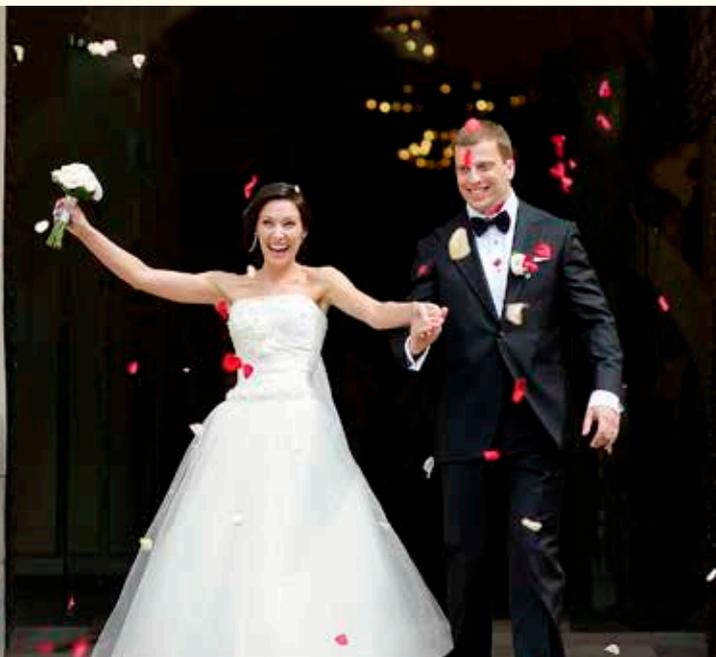
- Appointment with parish priest
- Pre-nuptial inquiry form completed
- Application made for dispensations (if necessary)
- Marriage preparation (via celebrant and suitable course)
- Meeting with celebrant to plan wedding liturgy/Mass
- Prayer and Sacraments (Christ at the centre!)



1. Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Pilgrimage of Families for the Year of Faith, St Peter's Square, 26 October 2013. 2. ABS, Marriages and Divorces Australia 2012. 3. Fulton J. Sheen, Three to Get Married, Scepter Publishers, New Rochelle, 1996 (first published 1951). 4. Catechism of the Catholic Church #1631; Code of Canon Law, canon 1055 §2. 5. C.A. Johnson et al, Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce, Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Oklahoma City, 2002. 6. Mark M. Gray, 'Divorce (Still) Less Likely Among Catholics', Georgetown University Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 26 September 2013. <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.ca/2013/09/divorce-still-less-likely-among.html> 7. Christopher G. Ellison et al, "The Couple That Prays Together: Race and Ethnicity, Religion, and Relationship Quality Among Working-Age Adults", Journal of Marriage and Family 72(4):963 (August 2010). 8. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Marriage in the Catholic Church: Frequently Asked Questions, Canberra, 2007, p. 19. 9. Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Pilgrimage of Families for the Year of Faith, St Peter's Square, 26 October 2013. 10. Code of Canon Law, canon 1127. 11. Pope Francis, Address to the Young People of Umbria, Basilica of St Mary of the Angels, Assisi, 4 October 2013.

*Two Christians who marry have recognized the call of the Lord in their own love story, the vocation to form one flesh and one life from two, male and female. And the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony envelops this love in the grace of God, it roots it in God himself. By this gift, and by the certainty of this call, you can continue on assured; you have nothing to fear; you can face everything together!<sup>11</sup>*

— POPE FRANCIS —



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY  
[lifemarriagefamily.org.au](http://lifemarriagefamily.org.au)